J.J. THIESSEN LECTURES

Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places

EUGENE H. PETERSON

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the 1998

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by

EUGENE H. PETERSON

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CONTENTS

Foreword	vii
The J. J. Thiessen Lectures	viii
Lecture One: Clearing the Playing Field	1
Two Stories	
Three Texts	
A Meta-Story	
Lecture Two: Christ Plays in Creation	23
Honoring the Father	
The Kerygma of Creation	
Dishonoring the Father: Gnosticism	
Cultivating the Honor of God the Father	
Lecture Three: Christ Plays in History	37
Honoring the Son	
The Kerygma of History	
Dishonoring the Son: Moralism	
Cultivating the Honor of God the Son	
Lecture Four: Christ Plays in Community	55
Honoring the Spirit	
The Kerygma of the Soul	
Dishonoring the Spirit: Sectarianism	
Cultivating the Honor of God the Spirit	

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FOREWORD

Every year in October the community at Canadian Mennonite Bible College adjusts its normal routine for two days to hear a prominent scholar on a topic pertinent to the college's program of studies. This event brings together not only the students of the college but also church leaders and scholars from the local community. These are important days.

The lectures are named in honour of a Canadian Mennonite churchman—Rev. J.J. Thiessen—who believed in the importance of the kind of Christian education that inspired people to faithful Christian living. His life expressed the conviction that the truth of theology could not be spoken once for always, but that the time and place of its living required fresh embrace and renewed ownership. Hence his love for Christian education. And for him this love was intimately connected with a cultivated memory, not only of the story of faith but of the names of the people who comprise the community of faith.

In 1998 Eugene Peterson delivered the J.J. Thiessen Lectures on the topic, "Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places." As the title illustrates, he is a master at playing with images and teasing messages out of the Christian story. In these lectures, as in his other writings, Peterson's convictions about the practice of the Christian faith are apparent from start to finish.

We are grateful that these lectures are being made available to a larger audience. We thank Professor Peterson for his teaching ministry, for his challenges and for his inspiration.

Harry Huebner
Chair of CMBC Lectureship Committee
February 1999

THE J.J. THIESSEN LECTURES

A fall lecture series held annually since 1978
at Canadian Mennonite Bible College
Winnipeg, Manitoba

1978 Marlin Miller, Professor of Theology at Goshen (Indiana) Biblical Seminary. *Mennonites and Contemporary Theology.*

1979 *Lectures cancelled.*

1980 J. Gerald Janzen, Professor of Old Testament at Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, Indiana. *The Terrors of History and the Fear of the Lord.*

1981 Frank H. Epp, Professor of History at Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo Ontario. *Mennonites with the Millennium on Their Mind.*

1982 Jürgen Moltmann, Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Tübingen, Germany. *Responsibility for the World and Christian Discipleship.*

1983 Cornelius J. Dyck, Professor of Anabaptist and Sixteenth Century Studies at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, Elkhart, Indiana. *Rethinking the Anabaptist Vision.*

1984 Kenneth Bailey, Professor of New Testament at the Near East School of Theology, Beirut, Lebanon. *Jesus Interprets His Own Cross: A Middle Eastern Cultural Approach.*

1985 Orlando Costas, Professor of Missiology at Andover Newton Theological School, Cambridge, Massachusetts. *The Crisis of Mission in the West and the Challenge of World Missions.*

1986 Susan Muto, Director of the Institute of Formative Spirituality at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. *Christian Spirituality and Everyday Living: A Practical Approach to Faith Formation.*

1987 Walter Klaassen, Research Professor of Religious Studies and History at Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario. *The Emancipated Laity: Anabaptism in Its Time*

1988 W. Sibley Towner, Professor of Old Testament at Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia. *The Bible and Our Human Nature.*

1989 Stanley Hauerwas, Professor of Theology and Ethics at the Divinity School, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. *Resident Aliens: The Church and Its Ministry.*

1990 Werner O. Packull, Professor of History at Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario. *Rereading Anabaptist Beginnings.*

1991 Howard I. Marshall, Professor of New Testament at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. *The Theological Message of the Letter to the Philippians.*

1992 George Lindbeck, Professor at Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Connecticut. *The Church as Hermeneutical Community: Jews, Christians and the Bible.*

1993 Phyllis A. Bird, Associate Professor of Old Testament Interpretation at Garret-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois. *Feminism and the Bible.*

1994 David Augsburger, Professor of Pastoral Counselling at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California. *Shepherding, Reconciling, Healing: The Church and Christian Counselling.*

1995 George Rawlyk, Professor in the Department of History, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario. *Is Jesus Your Personal Saviour? In Search of Canadian Evangelicalism in the 1990s.*

1996 Nancey Murphy, Associate Professor of Christian Philosophy at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California. *Christian Faith in a Scientific Age.*

1997 Richard B. Hays, Professor of New Testament at Duke Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina. *New Testament Ethics: The Story Retold*

1998 Eugene H. Peterson, James M. Houston Professor of Spiritual Theology at Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia. *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*

Eugene H. Peterson has taught at St. Mary's Seminary in Maryland; at Fuller Theological Seminary and New College Berkeley, both in California; at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania; and, for the past six years, has been James M. Houston Professor of Spiritual Theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. Dr. Peterson has over 30 years of experience in pastoral ministry in New York and Maryland and is well known as a lecturer and writer on many topics related to that work. He has published 29 books, including: *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work,* (John Knox, 1980; Eerdmans, 1992); *Working the Angles* (Eerdmans, 1987); *Under the Unpredictable Plant* (Eerdmans, 1992); and *Living the Message* (Harper, 1996).

1
CLEARING THE PLAYING FIELD

Introduction

The end is where we start from. "In my end is my beginning," says T.S. Eliot.[1] Endings take precedence over beginnings. We begin a journey by first deciding on a destination. We gather information and employ our imaginations in preparing ourselves for what is to come: Life is the end of life; life, life, and more life.

The end of spiritual theology is the living of everything we know about God: life, life, and more life. It is a protest against theology depersonalized into information about God; it is a protest against theology functionalized into a program of strategic planning for God.

A sonnet by the poet and priest Gerard Manley Hopkins provides an arresting and most accurate statement on the end of human life:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
   As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
   Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal being does one thing and the same:
   Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
   Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

I say more: the just man justices;
   Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—
   Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
   To the Father through the features of men's faces.[2]

We sense that life is more than what we are in touch with at this moment, but not different from it, not unrelated to it. We get glimpses of wholeness and vitality that exceed what we can muster out of our own resources. We get hints of congruence between who and what we are and the world around us—rocks and trees, meadows and mountains, birds and fish, dogs and cats, kingsfishers and dragonflies—obscure and fleeting but convincing confirmations that we are all in this together, that we are kin to all that is and has been and will be. We have this feeling in our bones that we are involved in an enterprise that is more than the sum of the parts that we can account for by looking around us and making an inventory of the details of our bodies, our families, our thoughts and feelings, the weather and the news, our job and leisure activities; that we will never quite make it out, never be able to explain or diagram it; that we will always be living a mystery, but a good mystery.

Everyone alive at this moment, with no other qualifications than simply being alive, can give personal witness to this More, this Congruence, this Kinship, this Mystery—that "Each mortal being does one thing and the same/Deals out that being indoors each one dwells." Our simplest word for all of this is Life.

The final lines of Hopkins' poem provide the image I want to use to characterize spiritual theology:

> For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
> Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
> To the Father through the features of men's faces.

The diction conveys the vigor and spark and spontaneity that are inherent in all of life. The focussed conviction expressed here is that it is Christ, the God-revealing Christ, who is behind and in all of this living. The message is that all this life, this kingfisher- and dragonfly-aflame life, this stone- and harp-string- and bell-sounding life gets played out in us, in our limbs

and eyes, in our feet and speech, in the faces of the men and women we see all day long, every day, in the mirror and on the sidewalk, in classroom and kitchen, in workplaces and on playgrounds, in sanctuaries and committees. The central verb, play, catches the exuberance and freedom that mark life when it is lived beyond necessity, beyond mere survival. Play also suggests words and sounds and actions that are "played" for another, intentional and meaningful renderings of beauty or truth or goodness. Hopkins also incorporates this sense of play, with God as the ultimate "other" (". . . to the Father")—which is to say that all life is, or can be, worship.

Hopkins' sonnet is as good a presentation of what we are after in understanding life, the "end" of life, as we are likely to find: The vigor and spontaneity, the God-revealing Christ getting us and everything around us in on it, the playful freedom and exuberance, the total rendering of our lives as play, as worship before God. Some of us, to prevent misunderstanding or reduction, sometimes supply a defining adjective to this life, the *Christian* life.

And so I have chosen Hopkins' sonnet to set the tone and identify the nature of this exercise in spiritual theology. What I am after is not unlike what Hopkins did when he made his poem. A poem, as you know, is a complex matter of sounds and rhythms, meanings nuanced and plain, the ordinary and the unexpected juxtaposed, all put together in such a way as to involve us as participants in life, more life, real life. And that is my intent—not to explain anything or hand out information, but enlist your play in the play of Christ. I don't have anything new to say; you already know the basics simply by being alive and baptized. But I hope to get you in on a little more of it.

I remember a phrase I heard often as my children were growing up. A neighbor child would show up at the door and say, "Can Eric (or Karen, or Leif) come out to play?" Consider me the neighbor child at your door. Will you do it? Will you

come out to play? There are four lectures: first lecture: Clearing the playing field; second: The play of creation; third: The play of salvation; fourth: The play of community.

We first need to level the playing field and clear out the debris so that we are working with common words and images. I will do that by setting before you two stories, three texts, and a meta-story.

The Two Stories

Story is the most natural way of enlarging and deepening our sense of reality, and then enlisting us as participants in it. Stories open doors to aspects of life we didn't know were there, or had quit noticing, or supposed were out-of-bounds to us, and then welcome us in. Stories are verbal acts of hospitality.

The first story is of Nicodemus, a Jewish rabbi. Nervous about his reputation, he came to talk with Jesus under cover of darkness. He would have lost credibility with his rabbi colleagues if it became known that he was consulting this disreputable itinerant teacher, this loose prophetic cannon out of nowhere, out of the no-place Nazareth in Galilee. So he came to Jesus by night. He came, it seems, simply to get acquainted, opening the conversation by complimenting Jesu:, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God" (John 3:2).

But Jesus discerned an agenda, a yet unspoken question; Nicodemus was after something. And so Jesus dismissed the introductory small talk and got down to business; he read Nicodemus's heart and addressed himself to that: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above" (3:3). So *that* is what Nicodemus was there for: to inquire about getting into the kingdom of God, living under the rule of God, participating in the reality of God.

Odd, because this is the kind of thing in which Nicodemus was supposed to be an expert. So why was he sneaking around, having a clandestine conversation with Jesus. Was it out of humility? That is plausible. Leaders who are looked up to constantly, who give out answers competently, whom everyone assumes are living what they say, often have acute experiences of dissonance: "Who I am and what people think I am aren't anywhere close to being the same thing. The better I get as a rabbi and the more my reputation grows, the more I feel like a fraud. I *know* so much more than I live. The longer I live, the more knowledge I acquire, the wider the gap between what I know and what I live. I'm getting worse by the day . . . ."

So perhaps it was this deep sense of unease, grounded in a true humility, that brought Nicodemus that night to Jesus. He wasn't looking for theological information but for a way *in*, not for anything more *about* the kingdom of God but for a personal guide/friend to show him the door and lead him in: "How do I *enter* . . . ."

Or was he there simply out of curiosity? This is also plausible. Leaders, if they are to maintain their influence, have to stay ahead of the competition, have to keep up with the trends, know what sells best in the current market. Jesus was attracting an enormous amount of attention these days—so what's his angle? what's his secret? how does he do it? Nicodemus was good at his work, but he knew he couldn't simply rest on his laurels. The world was changing fast. Israel was in a vortex of cultures—Greek learning and Roman government and Jewish moral traditions mixed in with gnostic sects, mystery cults, terrorist bands, and assorted messianic adventurers and fanatics. The mix changed weekly. Nicodemus had to be alert to every shift in the wind if he was going to keep his leadership out in front and on course. Jesus was the latest attraction and so Nicodemus was there that night to dig out some useful piece of strategy or lore. This is also plausible.

But our interest in teasing out the motive that brought Nicodemus to Jesus is not shared by the storyteller, St. John. There is no authorial interest in motive; this is a story about Jesus, not Nicodemus. Jesus does not question Nicodemus's motives nor does St. John explore them. After the brief opening gambit, Jesus seizes the initiative by introducing a startling, attention-demanding metaphor, "born again" or "born from above": ". . . I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above" (3:3); then, before Nicodemus can so much as catch his breath, Jesus adds another metaphor, even odder than the first, ". . . I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit" (3:5). Wind, Breath, and Spirit are the same word in the Aramaic that Jesus presumably spoke and also the Greek that St. John wrote. The necessity in those languages of using the same term for the movement of air caused by a contraction of the lungs, the movement of air caused by a shift in barometric pressure, and the life-giving movement of the living God in us, required an exercise of the imagination every time the word was used: What's being talked about here: breathing or weather or God?

No sooner have we asked the question than St. John clarifies matters by putting the literal and the metaphorical together side by side: "The *wind* [*pneuma*] blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the *Spirit*" [*pneuma*] (3:8). But then he complicates it even further by throwing in another metaphor, "born," creating one of Jesus most memorable sentences.

Nicodemus shakes his head. He doesn't get it.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Another story follows, this one of the Samaritan woman. The story takes place not at night as with Nicodemus but in

broad daylight by Jacob's Well in Samaria. Jesus is sitting alone when the woman comes to get water. Jesus opens the conversation by asking for a drink. The woman is surprised even to be spoken to by this man, this *Jew*, for there were centuries of religious bad blood beween the two ethnic groups.

She is surprised, but is she also wary? Do we detect an edge to her voice in her reply, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (4:9). Does she mistrust this man sitting at the well? It would seem she had good reason to. She is a woman hard-used by life. Later in the narrative we will find that she has been married five times and is now living with a man without benefit of marriage. It is not difficult to conjure a scenario of serial rejections, multiple failures, year by year accumulating wounds and scars in both mind and body. For her, to be a woman is to be a victim. To be near a man is to be near danger. What is this stranger going to do next, say next? Her guard is up.

Or is it just the opposite? Maybe that was not mistrust we detected in her question, but a teasing flirtatiousness. Maybe she is on the hunt. Maybe she used up those five husbands, one after another, and is now working her seductive ways on this sixth. Maybe she sees men as opportunities for gratification or access to power or advancement and when they no longer serve her pride or ambition or lust she dumps them. It is entirely possible that from the moment she saw Jesus she began calculating strategies of seduction: "Well, this is a nice surprise! Let's see what I can get out of this one."

We love playing these little games. Filling in the blanks, guessing at the reality behind the appearances, getting the inside scoop on people's lives. But again, just as in the Nicodemus story, Jesus shows no interest in playing the game and John shows no interest in exploring motives. He takes her just as he finds her, no questions asked. We realize that, as with Nicodemus, this is a story not about the woman but about Jesus.

After the opening conversational exchange at the well, Jesus begins talking in riddles: "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water" (4:10). Soon it becomes clear to us that Jesus is using the word "water" as a metaphor with the Samaritan just as he used "wind" as a metaphor with Nicodemus. The word water that began by referring to well water pulled up by a bucket is now being used to refer to something quite different, something interior, "a spring of water gushing up [in them] to eternal life" (4:14). And soon the earlier Nicodemus metaphor is added: "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (4:24).

"Spirit" again, the word that connects our sensory experience of breath and wind with the nature and activity of God. Just as the conversation is on the brink of degenerating into a squabble over where to worship, Jesus' words suddenly create a new reality in which God takes the center ground.

The woman gets it. She makes the connection between things she knows about messiah and what Jesus says to her, what he *is* to her. She is converted on the spot.

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The striking things about these two stories, set in parallel as they are by St. John, is that God's Spirit is at the heart of the action: the aliveness of God, the creating presence of God, the breath that is breathed into our lives just as it was breathed into Adam, the breath that makes us alive in ways that biology can neither command nor account for.

There is a corresponding feature: the stories together insist on accessibility. There is an unfortunate connotation that often accompanies the contemporary use of the word "spiritual"—a tinge of elitism, that only a select or in-the-know few can get in

on it. But these stories dismiss even a hint of that. The God-breathed life is common; it is totally accessible across the whole spectrum of the human condition. We are welcomed into life—there are no pre-conditions.

This realization of generous welcome is achieved first of all by the choice of vocabulary. The introductory metaphors in each story are completely accessible, everyone knows the words without using a dictionary; they come out of ordinary life: with Nicodemus it is birth; with the Samaritan woman it is water. We all have sufficient experience of those two words to know what is going on without further instruction. The metaphor common to both stories, wind/breath, is also plain. We all know what birth is: our being here is proof that we were born. We all know what water is: we drink it or wash with it several times a day. We know what wind/breath is: blow on your hand, take a deep breath, look at the leaves blowing in the breeze.

And then there are these features:

• The first story is about a man, the second about a woman. There is no preferred gender in the Christian life.

• The first story takes place in the city, the center of sophistication and learning and fashion; the second in the country of small towns. Geography has no bearing on perception or aptitude.

• Nicodemus is a respectable member of a strictly orthodox sect of the Pharisees; the Samaritan woman is a disreputable member of the despised sect of the Samaritans. Racial background, religious identity and moral record are neither here nor there in matters of spirituality.

• The man is named, the woman is unnamed. Reputation and standing in the community don't seem to count for anything.

• There is also this: Nicodemus begins his conversation with Jesus with a religious statement, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God . . . ." Jesus begins his conversa-

tion with the woman by asking for a drink of water, which doesn't sound the least bit religious. It doesn't seem to make any difference in the Christian life who gets things started, Jesus or we, or what the subject matter is, whether heavenly or earthly.

• And in both stories a reputation is put at risk: Nicodemus risks his reputation by being seen with Jesus; Jesus risks his reputation by being seen with the Samaritan woman. There is an element of daring here on both sides, a crossing of the lines of caution, a willingness to be misunderstood. When we get close to the heart of things we aren't dealing with assured results or conventional behavior. So—

A man and a woman;
A religious outsider and a religious insider;
A professional and a layperson;
A respectable man and a disreputable woman;
An orthodox and a heretic;
One who takes initiative; one who lets it be taken;
One named, the other anonymous;
Human reputation at risk; divine reputation at risk.

And there is more: In both conversations "spirit" is the pivotal word. Spirit links the differences and contrasts in the two stories and makes them aspects of one story. In both conversations "Spirit" refers primarily to God and only derivatively to the man and the woman: In the first conversation the Spirit gives birth ("So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit"); Spirit is an agent, a source, a cause of the birth that makes a person able to "see" and to "enter" (both verbs are used in the conversation). In the second conversation, God is Spirit; the consequence is that we worship him in spirit and truth; it is only because God is spirit that there is anything to say about what we do or don't do.

Finally, Jesus is the primary figure in both stories. Although Nicodemus and the Samaritan provide the occasion, it is Jesus

who provides the content. In everything that has to do with living, Jesus is at the center making it happen. In all matters of Christian spirituality, Jesus is far more active than any one of us are.

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We are not used to this. For us, "spiritual" is commonly used to describe moods or traits or desires or accomplishments—with the result that the word has become hopelessly garbled. The two stories rescue us from our confusion: we will no longer consult our own experiences or feelings or performance or those of our friends. We start with the stories and find a clearing in which to stand. We have removed some of the clutter by observing that:

- spirituality is not a body of secret lore;
- it has nothing to do with aptitude or temperment;
- spirituality is not primarily about you or me;
- it is not about personal power or enrichment;
- spirituality is about God.

Three Texts

The two stories set the word Spirit front and center for us. The word Spirit, designating God's Spirit, or Holy Spirit, occupies a prominent place throughout our scriptures and traditions. Three representative texts mark the range of the formative work of Spirit in the world in which we find ourselves: Genesis 1:1–3, Mark 1:9–11, and Acts 2:1–4. Each of these texts marks a beginning and in each text it is the Spirit that initiates the beginning.

G.K. Chesterton once said that there are two kinds of people in the world: When trees are waving wildly in the wind, one group of people thinks it is the wind that moves the trees; the other group thinks the motion of the trees creates the wind.

Most of humankind through most of its centuries have believed the former, that the wind moves the trees. But in recent times a new breed of people has emerged; they blandly hold that it is the movement of trees that creates the wind. The consensus has always held that the invisible is behind and gives energy to the visible. Chesterton in his work as a journalist, closely observing and commenting on people and events, reported with alarm that the broad consensus had fallen apart and that the modern majority naively assumes that what they see and hear and touch is basic reality, and it is that which generates whatever people come up with that cannot be verified with the senses.[3]

Having lost the metaphorical origin of "spirit" we operate in our daily conversations with a serious vocabularly deficit. Imagine how our perceptions would change if we eliminated the word spirit from our language and used only wind and breath? Spirit was not "spiritual" for our ancestors; it was sensual. Spirit was the invisible that had visible effects. It was invisible but it was not immaterial, for air has as much materiality to it as a granite mountain: it can be felt, heard and measured. It provides the molecules for the quiet breathing that is part of all life, human and animal, waking and sleeping; the puffs of air used to make words; the gentle breezes that caress the skin; the brisk winds that fill the sails of ships; the wild hurricanes that tear the roofs off barns and uproot trees.

It would clarify things enormously if we could withdraw "spirit" and "spiritual" from our language stock for awhile. But the three texts can serve as signposts in the muck of imprecision in which we find ourselves. The three texts mark the three beginnings, the beginning of creation, the beginning of salvation, and the beginning of the church.

Genesis 1:1–3

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void, and darkness

> *covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, Let there be light* . . . (Genesis 1:1–3).

God begins. God begins by creating. This act of creation accounts for everything there is, visible and invisible, "the heavens and the earth." Creation takes non-creation, or anti-creation, that which is "without form and void," that which is without light ("darkness upon the face of the deep") and makes something of it, gives it form, content, and floods it with light. Non-creation or pre-creation is pictured as ocean waters, deep and dark. Formless, anarchic, wild, unpredictable, death-dealing.

God breathes or blows over these waters. The breath is life and life-making. We see the wind blowing over these anarchic waters, these dark and lethal waters, God breathing life into this unlife, this nonlife.

Then this breath of God, no longer just an inarticulate blowing, is used to make words. The same breath that produces wind now makes language. We first *see* the effects of God's breath on the water, then we *hear* the articulation of God's breath in words: "God said . . . ." Eight times in the narrative God speaks. The eight sentences account for everything that is; they are the means of creating everything that is in heaven and earth.

Mark 1:10

> *In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn open and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased"* (Mark 1:9–11).

God begins again. A second beginning: Jesus is baptized and

identified as God's "beloved Son." Genesis presented us with a watery chaos breathed on by God into form and fullness and light; life both inorganic and organic emerges out of no-life. Mark presents us with a local and named river in which Jesus is baptized, first drowned in the river, then raised from the river. Baptism is a replay of Genesis. As Jesus is lifted out of the water, God breathes life into him. The breathing is given visibility this time by means of what looks like a dove descending out of heaven. And, as in Genesis, the breathing of God that is first given visibility, then becomes audible in speech, "This is my beloved Son . . . ."

A lot has happened between Genesis and Jesus. The creation that was brought into being by the life-breath of God has been battered around a good bit. Death became a major factor—death, anti-creation. Death: the denial of life, the elimination of life, the enemy of life. There is no energy in death, no movement in death, no words out of death. But death never prevailed. Always life, God-breathed, God-articulated life survived, at times even flourished. As death worked its way into the creation, an extensive vocabulary of death words was developed to identify its various forms, words like sin and rebellion and iniquity and lawlessness. We are given an extensively narrated story of life assaulted by death but all the time surviving death with God constantly, in new ways and old, breathing life into this death-plagued creation, these death-battered lives. A complex plot emerges as we read this story: God creating a way of life out of this chaos and misery, God countering death, God breathing life into creation and creatures, and the life-breath becoming audible in language over and over again. The vocabulary of life words counter and surpass the death words: words like love and hope, obedience and faith, salvation and grace and praise. Hallelujah and Amen words.

The God-breathed-into-life of Jesus, the God-blessed person

of Jesus at this moment begins to work out the consummation of salvation from death.

Acts 2:1–4

> *When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability* (Acts 2:1–4).

God begins again. A third beginning, as God breathes on a company of 120 followers of Jesus and creates the holy community, the church.

On the day of his ascension into heaven Jesus had told his apostles that God would breathe God's life into them just as God had breathed heaven and earth into creation, just as God had breathed blessing into Jesus at his baptism, confirming and authorizing the completion of salvation in him. Once having been breathed into life by God—"baptized with the Holy Spirit" was the way he put it (Acts 1:5)—they would have the strength and energy to continue the God-breathed creation of heaven and earth and the God-breathed salvation of Jesus. "My witnesses" was the term he used to designate their new identity.

They believed the promise. They told other Jesus-followers. Soon there were 120 of them waiting for it to happen. They were waiting for the God-breathed creation of heaven and earth and the God-breathed baptism of Jesus to be God-breathed into them. They waited ten days.

When it happened, as it most surely did, there were surprises. The continuity with God's life-giving breath in the

augmented—the holy breathing became a holy wind, "the rush of a mighty wind" (2:2) and filled the room. Soon the wind that filled the room (v. 2) filled them (v. 4). As if that were not enough, another sign was added, the sign of fire. Those gathered in a room that day were part of a tradition in which fire, commonly altar fire, was associated with the presence of God, but there was more to it here, this fire was *distributed*—each person individually signed with a tongue of fire, each person a sign of the presence of God. Just as the breathing of the Genesis-creation and the Jesus-baptism had swelled into a wind, so the old altar fires were multiplied into personalized fires burning above each waiting man and woman, each of them now a sign of God alive, God present.

Then, repeating the pattern of Genesis and Jesus, the breath/wind, that is, the living presence of God that filled each of them, was formed into spoken words by each. The tongues of fire became articulate in tongues of speech. The God-breathing that was formed into speech came out of the mouths of men and women speaking in all the languages (sixteen are named) represented in Jerusalem that day, and all the languages saying essentially the same thing, "the mighty works of God" (v. 11).

Everyone, of course, was properly astonished. The miracle of language is what first caught their attention, the God-originated and God-witnessing speech spoken in 16 (at least) different languages by ordinary men and women ("Galileans," that is, provincials who presumably would know only one or two languages). The confusion of languages at Babel (Genesis 11) was reversed. The continuing miracle that continues to astonish is that the same breath (life) of God that created heaven and earth, that validated and blessed Jesus, is now being breathed through ordinary men and women and formed into words that continue to give witness to God's Genesis-creation and Jesus-salvation.

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The three texts function like a tripod, anchoring every aspect of life—creation, salvation, communiy—in the living (breathing) God. God alive who makes alive. God the Spirit who imparts spirit. The three texts also make it clear that language is always involved in making and saving and carrying on life.

In the Christian tradition Spirit and Word are organically connected—they are not simply related or complementary—they are aspects of the same thing. From time to time there are attempts to launch wordless spiritualities in which silence is set as the goal. It is true that there is too much talk in most religion/spirituality. But the texts stand as authoritative: sooner or later something is said, reality is *spoken* into being.

And a Meta-Story

But the three texts are not isolated; they are found in a large, comprehensive *story*. Spiritual theology is conveyed to us primarily in the form of story. The Bible is basically and overall a narrative, an immense, sprawling, capacious narrative. Stories hold pride of place in revealing God and God's ways to us. It follows that storytellers in our Christian communities carry a major responsibility for keeping us alert to these stories and the way the stories work. Our best storytellers learn their craft from Jesus, famous for using story to involve his listeners in recognizing and dealing with God in their lives.

In both the Old and New Testaments of our Christian scriptures, story is the primary verbal means of bringing God's word to us. For that we can be most grateful, for story is our most accessible form of speech. Young and old love stories. Literate and illiterate alike tell and listen to stories. Neither stupidity nor sophistication put us outside the magnetic field of story. The only serious rival to story in terms of accessibility

and attraction is song, and there are plenty of those in the Bible too.

But there is another reason for the appropriateness of story as a major means of bringing us God's word. Story doesn't just tell us something and leave it there; it invites our participation. A good storyteller gathers us into the story. We feel the emotions, get caught up in the drama, identify with the characters, see into nooks and crannies of life that we had overlooked, realize there is more to this business of being human than we had yet explored. If the storyteller is good, doors and windows open. Our biblical storytellers, both Hebrew and Greek, were good in both the moral and aesthetic sense of that word.

Honest stories respect our freedom; they don't manipulate us, don't force us, don't distract us from life. They show us a spacious world in which God creates and saves and blesses. First through our imaginations and then through our faith—imagination and faith are close kin here—they offer us a place in the story, invite us into this large story that takes place under the broad skies of God's purposes in contrast to the gossipy anecdotes that we cook up in the stuffy closet of the self.

Of course, not all stories are honest. There are sentimentalizing stories that seduce us into escaping from life; there are propagandistic stories that attempt to enlist us in a cause or bully us into stereotyped response; there are trivializing stories that represent life as merely cute or diverting.

Spiritual theology requires a form adequate to its content, a form of storytelling that is at home in the Christian revelation and that respects each person's dignity and freedom. They *invite* us in as participants in something larger than our sin-defined needs, into something truer than our culture-stunted ambitions. We enter these stories and recognize ourselves as participants, whether willing or unwilling, in the life of God.

This needs saying because we live in an age when story has

been pushed from its biblical front-line prominence to a bench on the sidelines, condescended to as "illustration" or "testimony" or "inspirational."

Our contemporary unbiblical preference, both inside and outside the church, is for information over story. We typically gather impersonal (pretentiously called "scientific" or "theological") information, whether doctrinal or philosophical or historical, in order to take things into our own hands and take charge of how we will live our lives. And we commonly consult outside experts to interpret the information for us. But we don't live our lives by information. We live them in relationships in the context of a community of men and women, each person an intricate bundle of experience and motive and desire, and of a personal God, who cannot be reduced to formula or definition, who has designs on us for justice and salvation. Information-gathering and consultation of experts leave out nearly everything that is uniquely *us*—our personal histories and relationships, our sins and guilt, our moral character and believing obedience to God. Telling a story is the primary verbal way of accounting for life the way we live it in actual day-by-day reality. There are no (or few) abstractions in a story—story is immediate, concrete, plotted, relational, personal. And so when we lose touch with our lives, our *souls*—our moral and spiritual, our God-personal lives—story is the best verbal way of getting us back in touch again. Which is why God's Word is given for the most part in the form of story. And it is a vast, over-reaching, all-encompassing story—a meta-story.

One of the characteristic marks of the biblical storytellers is a certain reticence. Their stories have an austere, spare quality. They don't tell us too much. They leave a lot of blanks in the narration, an implicit invitation to enter the story ourselves, just as we are, and find how we fit into it. According to Erich Auerbach, "The Scripture stories do not, like Homer's, court

our favor, they do not flatter us that they may please us and enchant us—they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels."[4] These stories respect our freedom; they don't manipulate us, don't force us. They show us a spacious world in which God creates and saves and blesses.

The form in which language comes to us is as important as its content. If we mistake its form, we almost certainly will respond wrongly to its content. If we mistake a recipe for vegetable stew for a set of clues for finding buried treasure, no matter how carefully we read it, we will end up as poor as ever and hungry besides. If we misread a highway road sign, "60 miles per hour," as a randomly posted piece of information rather than as a stern imperative, "Don't drive over 60 miles per hour," we will eventually find ourselves pulled over on the side of the road with a police officer correcting our grammar. Ordinarily, we learn these discriminations early and well, and give form and content equal weight in determining meaning.

But when it comes to scripture we don't do nearly as well. Maybe it is because scripture comes to us so authoritatively, *God's* word, that we think all we can do is submit and obey. Submission and obedience are part of it, but first we have to listen. And listening requires listening to the *way* it is said (form) as well as to *what* is said (content).

Stories suffer misinterpretation when we don't submit to them simply as stories. We are caught off guard when divine revelation arrives in such ordinary garb, and think it's our job to dress it up in the latest Paris silk gown of theology, or outfit it in a sturdy three-piece suit of ethics before we can deal with it. The simple, or not so simple, story is soon, like David under Saul's armor, so encumbered with moral admonitions, theological constructs, and scholarly debates that it can hardly move. There are always moral, theological, historical elements in these stories which need to be studied and ascertained, but never despite of or in defiance of the story that is being told.

One of many welcome consequences in learning to "read" our lives in the scriptures is a sense of affirmation and freedom: we don't have to fit into prefabricated moral or mental or religious boxes before we are admitted into the company of God. We are taken seriously just as we are and given a place in his story, for it is, after all, *God's* story. None of us is the leading character in the story of our lives.

Spiritual theology using the scriptures as text does not so much present us with a moral code and tell us, "Live up to this," nor does it set out a system of doctrine and say, "Think like this and you will live well." The biblical way is to tell a story and invite us, "Live *into* this—this is what it looks like to be human in this God-made and God-ruled world; this is what is involved in becoming and maturing as a human being." We do violence to the biblical revelation when we "use" it for what we can get out of it or what we think will provide color and spice to our otherwise bland lives. That always results in a kind of "boutique spirituality"—God as decoration, God as enhancement. Spiritual theology will not allow that. We submit our lives to what we read in scripture and find that we are not being led to see God in our stories but our stories in God's story. God is the larger context and plot in which our stories find themselves.

Notes

1. T. S. Eliot, "East Coker," *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1952), 129.

2. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "As kingfishers catch fire . . .", *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins,* ed. W.H. Gardner (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1953), 51.

3. G.K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles* (London: Methuen, 1909), 92.

4. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis,* tr. Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 15.

2
CHRIST PLAYS IN CREATION

Introduction

We wake up each morning and find ourselves in an incredibly beautiful country, various and exquisite. Breathtaking beauty. Heartstopping wonders. We lift our eyes to the hills and see God: praise and gratitude spring spontaneously from our lips—thanks!

But this beautiful country is also a dangerous country. There are crazy people out there with guns; there are storms and drunken drivers; lightning strikes at random; mosquitoes crash our picnics. We fasten our seatbelts, train our children not to speak to strangers, and apply insect repellent. Not infrequently we cry out—help!

This beautiful and dangerous country is also, in some mysterious yet inescapable way, *my* country, *our* country. We are not tourists here; we are not spectators taking photographs of the cliffs and meadows, the quaint cottages and the odd people; we don't have the leisure to write excited letters to our friends about the beauties we admire and the dangers we fear. We are part of it: we don't just look and admire, or look and fear—we *respond.* It's hardly a decision; we can't help it: everything out there touches something in here, in me, in you, in us; *Respondeo etsi mutabor*—"I respond although I will be changed," writes Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy.[1]

Did you think I was talking about your home town? I'm not; I'm talking about the Country of the Trinity. I want to talk about living in the Country of the Trinity. One of the early and definitive realizations in the Christian community is that everything about us—our worshiping and learning, conversing

and listening, obeying and deciding, working and playing, eating and sleeping—takes place in the large and expansive country of the Trinity. And when we do it well, we do it all in praise of Christ who "plays in ten thousand places," revealing the Father by the Holy Spirit. Our task is to adequately honor the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

What I intend in these lectures is to set out our preaching/pastoring lives in this Country in which we know and believe in and serve God. I want to focus our attention on the persons and work of the Trinity: the Father and creation, the Son and salvation, and the Spirit and community

There is more to this than getting a theological dogma straight; the Country of the Trinity is also geography and history and personal experience. Trinity isn't something imposed on us; it is inherent in where we are, what is happening, and what we are saying and doing and feeling personally.

So—Trinity. Trinity maps the country in which we know and receive and obey God. It is not the country itself, but a map of the country. And a most useful map it is, for God is vast and various, working visibly and invisibly. Left to ourselves we often get lost in blind alleys and tangled up in thickets and don't have a clue where we are. The map locates us: it provides the vocabulary and identifies the experience by which we can explore God when there are no signs pointing to God, when there are no neatly lettered labels defining the odd shape or feeling that is in front of our eyes.

Moreover, even though there is something artifical about a map, it is not imposed on the land. It comes out of careful observation and accurate recording of what is actually there. It is required that maps be honest. Furthermore, maps are humble—they don't pretend to substitute for the country itself. Studying the map doesn't provide experience of the country. The purpose of the map is to get us into the country and prevent us from getting lost in our travels.

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I will follow an identical outline in each of the next three lectures. After some introductory remarks on the Trinity, setting our "Christ Plays" theme in the context of God's comprehensive revelation, I will begin by honoring, in turn, the persons of the Trinity by "exploring the neighborhood" of their respective areas of revelation; then state the kerygmatic aspect of Jesus' life that proclaims the gospel in this area; then show a typical way in which we dishonor each person of the Trinity; and finally propose a single and focussed way to set about cultivating the honor of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Honoring the Father
Exploring the Neighborhood of Creation

We wake up each morning to a world we did not make. How did it get here? How did we get here? We open our eyes and see that "old bowling ball, the sun" careening over the horizon. We wiggle our toes. A mocking bird takes off and improvises on themes set down by robins, vireos and wrens, and we marvel at the intricacies. The smell of frying bacon works its way into our nostrils and we begin anticipating buttered toast, scrambled eggs, and coffee freshly brewed from our favorite Javanese beans.

There is so much *here*—around, above, below, inside, outside. Even with the help of poets and scientists we can account for very little of it. We notice this, then that. We start exploring the neighborhood. We try this street, and then that one. We venture across the tracks. Before long we are looking out through telescopes and down into microscopes, curious, fascinated by this endless proliferation of sheer I-ness—color and shape and texture and sound.

After a while we get used to it and quit noticing. We get narrowed down into something small and constricting. Somewhere along the way this exponential expansion of awareness,

this wide-eyed looking around, this sheer untaught delight in what is here, reverses itself: the world contracts; we are reduced to a life of routine through which we sleepwalk.

But not for long. Someone always shows up to wake us up: a child's question, a fox's sleek beauty, a sharp pain, a pastor's sermon, a fresh metaphor, an artist's vision, a slap in the face, scent from a crushed violet. We are again awake, alert, in wonder: how did this happen? And why this? Why anything at all? Why not nothing at all?

Gratitude is our spontaneous response to all this: to *life*. Something wells up within us: thank you! More often than not, the thank you is directed to God, even by those who don't believe in God. Johnny Bergman was a young man in my congregation. He and his wife were enthusiastic participants, but then the weeds of worldly care choked their young faith. They acquired children. They became suddenly wealthy and their lives filled up with boats and cars, house-building and social engagements. They were less and less frequently in worship. After a two-year absence, on a bright sunshiny Sunday, Johnny was there again. Surprised to see him I said, "Johnny! What brought you to worship today?" He said, "I woke this morning feeling so good, so blessed—so *created*— I just had to say thank you, and this is the only place I could think to say it rightly, adequately—I wanted to say it to Jesus." His absence resumed, but the moment struck me as remarkable, and true. (There is a sequel to this moment. Johnny didn't come back for a long time—five years it was—and then in a very different frame of mind. His wife had left him, his emotions were in chaos, his children a mess. Pain brought him back that time, and that time he stayed.)

Thank you, God. Not just thanks, and not Thank It. We find ourselves in a lavish existence of living; we say thanks with our lives to Life. Most of the people who have lived on this planet earth have identified this You with God or gods. This is not just a matter of learning our manners, the way children are taught to

say thank you as a social grace. It is the cultivation of adequateness within ourselves to the nature of reality, developing the capacity to sustain an adequate response to the overwhelming giftedness of life.

The Kerygma of Creation: The Birth of Jesus

Naturally, we are interested in what is behind all this: meaning and purpose and implications. We begin by believing in God. Creation is not something we figure out, or deduce, or argue—it is what we believe: *credo*. "By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things that do not appear (Hebrews 11:3).

There is a great deal of interest these days in what is sometimes called "creation spirituality" which has something very attractive about it: it is so clean and uncomplicated and non-controversial. And obvious. Here we can get God without all the complications of theology and the mess of church history and incompetence of pastors and appeals for money. This is a spirituality that prefers beautiful beaches and fine sunsets, surfing and skiing and body massage, emotional states and aesthetic titillation. But for all its considerable attractions, it is considerably deficient in person. Our Christian scriptures take quite a different tack: God reveals himself most completely in a named person, Jesus.

The Genesis stories of creation begin environmentally, but that turns out to be merely the requisite context for the creation of human life, man and woman, designated "image of God." Man and woman are alive with the very breath ("spirit") of God. If you want to look at creation full, creation at its highest, you look at a person—a man, a woman, a child. This faddish preference for a bouquet of flowers over a squalling baby, for a day on the beach rather than rubbing shoulders with uncongenial neighbors in a cold church, is understandable, but is also decidedly not creation in the terms it has been revealed to us.

The center of creation spirituality is Jesus; and the kerygmatic focus for this creation spirituality is achieved in the proclamation of his birth. Birth. And in this case "virgin birth." God is "maker of heaven and earth," true. But all the "heaven and earth" stuff turns out to be a warm-up exercise for the main-event creation of human life.

In St. John's gospel rewriting of Genesis he states, ". . . the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). St. Matthew and St. Luke begin their gospel stories with detailed accounts of Jesus' birth. St. Paul in the first reference to Jesus' birth calls Jesus the "firstborn of creation" (Colossians 1:15).

In the act of believing in creation, we accept and enter into and submit to what God does. We are not spectators of creation but participants in it—participants first of all by simply being born, but our birth is in the defining context of Jesus' birth.

We begin with Jesus. Jesus is the revelation of the God who created heaven and earth; he is also the revelation of the God who is with us, Immanuel. Karl Barth goes into immense detail (he wrote four fat volumes on it) to make this single point: "We have established that from every angle Jesus Christ is the key to the secret of creation."[2] Every birth can, if we let it, return us to the wonder of Jesus' birth: the revelation of sheer life, God's life with us and for us.

God is a creator and his primary work of creation is human life, a baby. And we, as participants in creation, do it too. When we beget and conceive, give birth to and raise, babies we are in on the heart of creation. There is more gospel in all those "begats" in the genealogical lists of our scriptures than we ever dreamed.

A few years ago I was invited by my daughter-in-law to be present at the birth of her third child. She knew how disappointed I was in never having been permitted to be in on the birth of my own three children. In the days Jan and I were

having children, fathers were banished to outer darkness (where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth) at the time and place of birth. So, what I had missed with my own children, by my daughter-in-law's generosity I experienced with this grandchild.

Nowhere I have ever been and nothing I have ever done in God's creation rivals what I experienced in that birthing room. The setting was austere—antiseptic and functional—but the life, the sheer life, exploding out of the womb that night, transformed it into a place of revelation. My son received the baby into his hands as she came into the world. "Welcome, Sadie Lynn!"

I have climbed mountain peaks that gave me views of glaciated mountains in wave after wave of ranges, but none of those breathtaking vistas was comparable to seeing that baby enter the world; I have heard the most delicate and exquisite birdsong and some of the best musicians in the world, but no sounds rivaled the cries of that baby. I was a latecomer to this experience that is common to most fathers today and common to the human race as a whole. Does anyone ever get used to this? I was captured by the wonder of life, the miracle of life, the mystery of life, the glory of life.

The day after the birth I was in the grocery store getting some vegetables and grains for the family. There were several mothers shopping up and down the aisles with young children in tow—many of them were snarling and snapping at the overlively, curiosity-filled, energy-splattering kids. I wanted to grab the mothers, embrace them, tell them, "Do you realize what you have done? You have given birth to a child, a *child*—this miracle, this wonder, this glory? You're a Madonna! Why aren't you in awe and on your knees with the magi, with the shepherds?" Luckily I restrained myself; "Madonna" probably wouldn't have had the same meaning for them as it had for me.

Birth, any birth, is our primary access to the creation work of God the Father. And Jesus' virgin birth proclaims the gospel involved in that creation.

Dishonoring the Father: Gnosticism

This has never been an easy truth for people to swallow. Birth is painful, babies are inconvenient and messy. There is immense trouble involved in having children. God having a baby? It's far easier to accept God as the creator of the majestic mountains, the rolling sea, the delicate wildflowers, fanciful unicorns, and "tigers, tigers burning bright."

When it comes to the sordid squalor of human being-ness, God is surely going to keep his distance from that. We have deep aspirations native to our souls to escape this business of diapers and debts, government taxes and domestic trivia. We were created for higher things—there is a world of subtle ideas and fine feelings and exquisite ecstasies for us to cultivate. Somewhere along the way some of us realize that *our* souls are *different*—a cut above the masses, the common herd of philistines that trample the courts of the Lord. We become connoisseurs of the sublime.

Some of our most celebrated poets and writers reinforce this spiritual preference for the non-human over the human. Walt Whitman, for all his celebration of common men and women, compared us unfavorably to animals. The quiet serenity of cows at pasture seemed to Whitman a higher form of consciousness to the snarling, bickering unwashed mobs of New York City. Kahlil Gibran, whose poetry outranks Jesus and St. Paul at so many modern weddings, mostly has his head in the clouds and his mind on what has come to be called "the higher things."

As it turned out, the ink was barely dry in the stories telling of the birth of Jesus, before people were busy putting out alternate stories. A rash of apocryphal stories flooded the early

church, stories in which Jesus was smoothed out and universalized. They were immensely popular. They still are. And people are still writing them. These alternate stories proved very attractive to a lot of people.

In these accounts of the Christian life, the hard-edged particularities of Jesus' life are blurred into the sublime divine—"boutique spirituality." The hard, historical factuality of the incarnation, the word made flesh as God's full and complete revelation of himself, is dismissed as crude. Something finer and more palatable to sensitive souls is put in its place. Jesus was not truly flesh and blood, but entered a human body temporarily in order to give us the inside story on God and initiate us into the secrets of the spiritual life. And of course he didn't die on the cross, but made his exit at the last minute. The body that was taken from the cross for burial was not Jesus at all, but a kind of costume he used for a few years and then discarded.

It turned out that Jesus merely role-played a historical flesh-and-blood Christ for a brief time and then returned to a purely spiritual realm. In the spiritual life, we follow his lead—putting up with materiality and locale and family for as much and as long as it is necessary, but only for as much and as long as necessary. The material, the physical, the body—history and geography and weather— is temporary scaffolding; the sooner we learn to get along without it, the better.

The attractions of this kind of thing are considerable. The feature attraction is that we no longer have to take seriously—that is, with eternal seriousness, God seriousness—either things or people. Anything you can touch, smell, or see is not of God in any direct or immediate way. We save ourselves an enormous amount of inconvenience and aggravation by putting materiality of every kind at the edge of our lives. Mountains are nice as long as they inspire lofty thoughts, but if

one stands in the way of my convenience, a bulldozer can be called in to get rid of it. (And didn't Jesus say something like this, that faith was useful for getting rid of mountains? If a bulldozer can do the same thing, isn't it already pre-sanctioned by Jesus?) People are glorious as long as they are good-looking, well-mannered, bolster my self-esteem and help me fulfill my human potential, but if they smell badly or function poorly they certainly deserve to be dismissed. (It's what Jesus did, isn't it? When Peter proved incompetent spiritually Jesus curtly dismissed him with the rebuke: "Get behind me Satan!") If we are going to be truly spiritual beings, we need to free ourselves of all that is unspiritual.

The accompanying attraction to this refined life is that when we engage in it we find ourselves members of an elite spiritual aristocracy. We are insiders to God, privileged members of the ultimate "club"—the Inner Ring of Enlightened Souls. This all sounds and feels so good that there are very few of us who have been involved in religion who haven't given it a try. No church is safe from its influence, and no one who desires to live a godly life is impervious to its attraction.

"Gnostic" is the term we often use to designate this most attractive but soul-destroying spirituality. Gnosticism is a virus in the bloodstream of religion and keeps resurfacing every generation or so advertised as brand new, replete with a new brand name. On examination, though, it turns out to be the same old thing but with a new public relations agency. Gnosticism offers us a spirituality without the inconvenience of creation.

St. John's Gospel is our most vigorous scriptural polemic against this de-materialized, elitist spirituality, but our entire scriptures are arrayed against it. What I want to say right now is that however attractive, it dishonors the Father: God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; God the Father of

whom Jesus is the only-begotten Son. The world the Father makes and the Son the Father begets are denied or ignored or avoided; but however this spirituality happens, it amounts to desecration of the Father, a dishonoring of the Father.

Cultivating the Honor of God the Father

The Christian community has never supposed that its work was done by simply saying all this. It *has* said it, and written it, and taught and preached it. We have to know the God-reality in which we are placed in order to live appropriately and adequately in it, but we also have to cultivate a believing imagination and a faithful obedience that is appropriate and adequate to this reality. So, what do we do to cultivate the honor of God the Father?

The counsel and guidance of Scripture and Church are simple and succinct: Keep Sabbath, or, as the early church put it, Keep the Lord's Day. The most striking thing about keeping the Lord's Day is that it begins by not doing anything. The Hebrew word, *shabbat,* which we take over as is, untranslated, into our language simply means, "Quit . . . Stop . . . Take a Break." As such, it has no religious or spiritual content: Whatever you are doing, stop it . . . . Whatever you are saying, shut up . . . . Sit down and take a look around you . . . . Don't do anything . . . . Don't say anything.

But it soon appears that there is more to it than a not-doing, a not-talking. The word arrives on the page of Genesis in the context of creation, God the Father making heaven and earth. When the work was complete God stopped speaking, stopped making (Genesis 2:1–4). The not-doing, in other words, takes place in the context of much-doing.

When this not-doing is given at Sinai as a command for us to keep, two different reasons are provided to support it, one in the Exodus account, the other in the Deuteronomy account. The

Exodus reason is that this is what God did; God worked and then quit working (Exodus 20:8–11). The Deuteronomy reason is that when his people were slaves in Egypt it was work, work, work—incessant, unrelieved work; they must never perpetuate such oppression; they must quit work each seventh day so that their slaves and livestock and children will get a day off (Deuteronomy 5:12–15). The Exodus reason is theological—this is the way God does it; the Deuteronomy reason is social—this is simple justice.

This precedent (Genesis) and command (Exodus and Deuternomy) became deeply embedded in the life of Israel. But it was never simply not-doing—the context wouldn't permit it. Human not-doing became a day of God-honoring. God worked in creation (Genesis); God worked in salvation (Exodus)—all our work is done in the context of God-work. Sabbath is a deliberate act of interference, an interruption of our work each week, a decree of no-work so that we are able to notice, to attend, to listen, to assimilate this comprehensive and majestic work of God.

If there is no Sabbath—no regular and commanded not-working, not-talking—we become totally absorbed in what we are doing and saying, and God's work is either forgotten or marginalized. Our work becomes the context in which we define our lives. We lose God-consciousness, God-awareness. We lose the capacity to sing, "This is my Father's world," and end up chirping little self-centered ditties about what *we* are doing and feeling.

This is a most difficult command to keep, a most difficult practice to cultivate. It is one of the most abused and distorted practices of the Christian life. Many through the centuries have suffered much under oppressive sabbath regimens. It is difficult to assemble a congregation of Christians today which does not number in its company both oppressed and oppressors. Jesus

spent a good deal of his time at odds with people who had wrong ideas about keeping sabbath. We can't expect an easy time of it ourselves.

But I don't see any way out: if we are going to honor the Father, we must keep the sabbath. We must stop running around long enough to see what he has done and is doing. We must shut up long enough to hear what God has said and is saying. All our ancestors agree that without silence and stillness there is no spirituality, no God-attentive, God-responsive life.

But I do have a suggestion: re-imagine, re-structure, restore the Lord's Day as a day of not-doing, not-saying. Free the Christians in your congregations to do nothing on Sunday. Gathering for Lord's Day worship has a long and honorable tradition among us and provides the best way for most of us to attend to the Father in his revelation in Jesus. But we need to keep it simple.

Pastors and congregational leaders commonly cram the Lord's Day with work: committees and meetings and projects and mission and social activities put much doing and much talking in the place of sabbath quietness and stillness. We have these people for just one day a week and want to get them involved in everything we think will be good for their souls, and good for the church. Well-intentioned, but dead wrong. All we do is get them so busy for the Lord that they have no time for the Lord; pour in so much information about God that they never have a chance to listen to God.

Clear out the clutter of Sundays for a start. And then engage in corporate ways to do nothing, to say nothing: in quietness and rest you shall be saved. Cultivate solitude. Cultivate silence. There is nothing novel in what I am saying; this is counsel at the center of those who have led us into an obedient and faithful life of mission and prayer for 20 centuries now. I have nothing new to say on the subject; but I am convinced that

it is critical to say it again, to say it urgently, to say it in Jesus name: keep sabbath . . . attend . . . adore. Honor the Father.

If we are not simply to contribute a religious dimension to the disintegration of our world, to join company with the mobs who are desecrating the creation with their hurry and hype in frenzy and noise, we must attend to God and adore God. One large step in the renewal of the church today is to take the next step: stand where we are, listen to our Lord: Attend, Adore.

Notes

1. Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *I Am an Impure Thinker* (Norwich, Vermont: Argo Books, 1970), 2.

2. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Part III, vol. 1* (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1958), 28.

3
CHRIST PLAYS IN HISTORY

Introduction

The strength and attraction of the Christian gospel has always been in its invitation to get in on what God is doing by the Spirit through Christ. Our theological ideas are dazzling; our Bible studies are essential; our missions are energizing—but it is Jesus Christ alive and Jesus Christ lived in our lives that makes us Christians. Whenever the church drifts into talking about Jesus more than following Jesus, wanders into doing things for Jesus as an avoidance of being with Jesus, ordinary Christians come forward saying to their leaders, "Your ideas are wonderful, your projects are inspiring, but we want to be with Jesus; we want to enjoy his presence; we want to live our lives to the glory of God as it is revealed in Jesus."

We are in one of those eras right now—a time when the hunger and thirst for righteousness are being expressed openly and widely. We have been through a time when thinking has taken precedence over ordinary living, and when public performance has obscured personal relationships. "Spirituality" is the usual term to describe this hunger and thirst. The hunger and thirst are as prevalent in the church as in the world, as prevalent in the world as in the church. The word "spirituality" in itself doesn't mean much—it has no content to it. It is associated with drugs and sex and athletics and music and mountains and birds as frequently—maybe even more frequent-ly—than it is with God.

And even when the word is used in association with God, it continues to be short on content. We live in Montana on a mountain lake. We have neighbors to the north of us up the

lakeshore. The other night our neighbor had a friend visiting. They were sitting out on a boat dock talking and drinking. We had gone to sleep with our window open. About three o'clock in the morning we were awakened by one of them, pretty far gone in drink by then, saying, "Mike, I believe in God—yes, Mike, I believe in God—I do believe in God. Oh, do I ever believe in God." And on and on.

Jan wanted to shout out to them, "This is God—thank you for believing; now will you shut up and let me go back to sleep."

But I restrained her—it didn't seem to me a very Christian thing to throw cold water on such a deeply spiritual exchange. For the conversation between the two men certainly qualified as spirituality; they felt spiritual, and they used two of the most important spiritual words, "believe" and "God." But the only spiritual consequence the conversation had was a hangover the next day, a very spiritual hangover,

The Christian way of approaching this hunger and thirst for life is to root and ground it in Jesus in the context of the Trinity. The Trinity is sometimes supposed to be the most abstruse and intellectual of church doctrines, the most removed from what we sometimes call "real living." But in fact it is the most practical, having to do with all the day-to-day issues that face us as individuals, congregations, and denominations from the time we get out of bed in the morning until we fall asleep at night.

And here's the reason: God the Father is revealed in Jesus the Son by the Holy Spirit; in Jesus and only in Jesus, do we know God as Lord and Savior. But the meaning of Jesus is the Father; and the means by which we know Jesus is the Holy Spirit. Our lives are determined and find their meaning in this revelation. Everything God is and does and everything we are and do, personally and corporately, are accounted for by this revelation.

The concept of Trinity is the church's attempt to understand God's self-revelation in all its parts and relationships. And a

most useful work it has been. At a most practical level it prevents us from getting involved in highly religious but soul-destroying ways of going about things.

The first of these soul-destroying ventures into spirituality is reducing God to something simple so that we can, as we say, "get a handle on God"—reducing God to what we need at the moment or see as useful in the present crisis. There is always more to God and God's ways that we know or need. Trinity is our defense against reductionism.

The second practicality of the Trinity is that it demonstrates that God exists in personal relationship and therefore can only be known in personal relationship. We cannot know God in any other way than the way in which he reveals himself, that is, relationally. God cannot be known as true idea or a righteous cause or as private experience. We cannot know God simply by thinking hard of or working hard for him or by shutting ourselves up in a room free of all distractions and meditating on him. God exists in personal relationship and can only be known as he is—personally, relationally. The Trinity is our defense against the soul-destroying venture into spirituality that depersonalizes God.

The Trinity is of particular use to Christians in times of confusion. In desperate times we are tempted to go for the quick answer and the efficient solution. The quick answer is almost always the oversimplified one, leaving out all the complexities of actual truth; the efficient solution is almost always the depersonalized one for persons take a lot of time and endless trouble.

Trinity keeps us in the touch with the immense largesse of God and the immediate personalness of God. Honoring the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit is the most important thing we can do to keep our lives large and personal during these times when the devil is using every strategy he can come up with to make us small and mean.

Honoring the Son
Exploring the Neighborhood of History

The Christ who "plays in ten thousand places" is a Trinitarian Christ. In his revelation Christ is always revealing the Father by means of the Spirit. But when we look at Christ in focus, some distinctive elements in our spirituality come into view.

But first a brief reference to the first and third persons of the Trinity may help to keep the context large. In honoring the Father we look around the neighborhood and are struck by sheer profusion of life—the life of a rose in blossom, a red-tailed hawk in flight, a cat on the prowl, but mostly human life: every baby born a fresh witness to a mystery that ever eludes us but never, if we take the time for it, fails to put us on our knees in adoration. Every time a baby is born the gospel is preached. This is the world of experience in which we receive the revelation of God the Father.

In honoring the Holy Spirit we take ourselves seriously: we realize that there is more to us than biology and history, our genetic code and family tree. We have both the desire and the capacity to get in on what God is doing—we find ourselves believing and praying in community. We are not content to be spectators. We are in on the resurrection life of Jesus and we want to make the most of it. This is the world of experience that we cultivate in a life of obedient love in honor of the Spirit.

But between this honoring of the Father in the adoration and wonder of being alive in this creation, and this honoring of the Spirit in realizing that we are called to be a company of participants in this resurrection life, Christ holds a middle ground that keeps the whole business here and now—historical. For this wonderful creation that we are set in by our Father and this marvelous resurrection in which we participate by the Spirit are held together by the revelation of Jesus who suffered and died for us in datable time and locatable space.

But we are not on our knees in adoration very long before we

find that everything is not wonderful. And we are not up on our feet very long, resurrection-eager and ready to love, before we find that not everybody thinks that the resurrection is so wonderful. The lovely baby cries, gets sick, interrupts our sleep, invades our comfortable routines. And then begins to grow and turns into a disobedient, defiant brat: he refuses to eat what we prepared for supper; she leaves her room a mess. It's not long before we are having headaches and sleepless nights over this child that just a few days ago we were cuddling in our arms.

If the world is so wonderful, if life is so amazing, why all this trouble, this mess? We pick up this lovely apple and bite into it, and then find that there is a worm in it. This is the world of experience in which we receive the revelation of God the Son. And this is the world that I want to characterize by the phrase, "the mess of history." It is a world bounded by birth and new birth, by the virgin birth of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus. And it is the world that we enter when we are born and that we continue to live in after being born again. History.

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I had a delayed but abrupt introduction into the mess of history. I grew up in a Christian home with good parents. I was told the story of Jesus and instructed in the right way to live. I was loved and treated well. In my memory it was a fair approximation of the garden of Eden—a good and wonderful creation. Life. Our modest house was on a gravel road on the edge of a small Montana town, three or four blocks beyond where the sidewalks ended. It was a neighborhood with plenty of playmates, none of whom went to church, but their unbaptized state never seemed to make any difference in that pre-school life of games (kick-the-can, hide-and-seek, softball) and imagination (pretending to be explorers like Lewis and Clark and Indians like Chief Joseph and Sacajawea). There were trees to climb and a

creek in which to swim. There was a meadow bordering our back yard in which cows grazed. We used the dried cowflop for bases in our ball games.

And then I went off to school and discovered what St. John named "the world"—those people who do not regard God with either reverence or obedience. This knowledge came into my life in the person of Garrison Johns. Garrison was a year older than I and the school bully. He lived in a log house a couple of hundred yards beyond where I lived, the yard littered with rusted out trucks and cars. I had been in that house only once. It was a cold winter day and his mother, a beautiful willowy woman as I remember her, invited me and the Mitchell twins in to warm us up with a bowl of moose meat chili that was simmering on the back of the wood stove. Struggling through deep snow, we were taking a shortcut home through her backyard. We must have looked half frozen—we *were* half frozen—and she had compassion on us. But Garrison wasn't there. I had never seen him close up, only at a distance. He wore a red flannel shirt, summer and winter, and walked with something of a swagger that I admired and tried to imitate. Being a year older than I and living just far enough away, he was beyond the orbit of my neighborhood games and friendships. I knew of his reputation for meanness, but the memory of his mother's kindness tempered my apprehension. I wasn't prepared for what was to come.

About the third day in school, Garrison discovered me and took me on as his project for the year and gave me a working knowledge of what twenty-five years later Richard Niebuhr would give me a more sophisticated understanding of in *Christ and Culture*. I had been taught in Sunday school not to fight and so had never learned to use my fists. I had been prepared for the wider world of neighborhood and school by memorizing, "Bless those who persecute you," and "Turn the other cheek." I don't know how Garrison Johns knew that about me, some sixth sense that bullies have, I suppose, but he picked me for his sport. Most

afternoons after school he would catch me and beat me up. He also found out that I was a Christian and taunted me with "Jesus-sissy." I tried finding alternate ways home by making detours through alleys, but he stalked me and always found me out. I arrived home every afternoon, bruised and humiliated. My mother told me that this had always been the way of Christians in the world and that I had better get used to it. I was also supposed to pray for him. The Bible verses that I had memorized ("Bless . . ." and "Turn . . .") began to get tiresome.

I loved going to school, learning so much, finding new friends, adoring my teacher. The classroom was a wonderful place. But soon after the dismissal bell each day I had to face Garrison Johns and get my daily beating that I was trying my best to assimilate as my "blessing."

March came. I remember that it was March by the weather. The winter snow was melting, but there were still patches of it here and there. The days were getting longer—I was no longer walking home in the late afternoon dark. And then one day something unexpected happened. I was with my neighborhood friends on this day, seven or eight of them, when Garrison caught up with us and started in on me, jabbing and taunting, working himself up to the main event. He had an audience, and that helped; he always did better with an audience.

That's when it happened. Totally uncalculated. Totally out of character. Something snapped within me. For just a moment the Bible verses disappeared from my consciousness and I grabbed Garrison. To my surprise, and his, I realized that I was stronger than he was. I wrestled him to the ground, sat on his chest and pinned his arms to the ground with my knees. I couldn't believe it—he was helpless under me. At my mercy. It was too good to be true. I hit him in the face with my fists. It felt good and I hit him again—blood spurted from his nose, a lovely crimson on the snow. By this time all the other children were cheering, egging me on. "Black his eyes! Bust his teeth!" A torrent of biblical

invective poured from them, although nothing compared with what I would, later in my life, read in the Psalms. I said to Garrison, "Say 'Uncle'." He wouldn't say it. I hit him again. More blood, more cheering. Now the audience was bringing the best out of *me.* And then my Christian training reasserted itself. I said, "Say, 'I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior'."

And he said it. Garrison Johns was my first Christian convert.

Garrison Johns was my introduction into the world, the "world" that "is not my home." Creation is wonderful, but History is a mess. He was also my introduction to how effortlessly that same "world" could get into me, making itself at home under cover of my Christian language and "righteous" emotions.

That happened sixty years ago. I have recently moved back and taken up residence once more in this Montana valley in which I grew up, was beaten up by Garrison Johns almost daily for seven months, and on that March afternoon in 1938 bloodied his nose and obtained his Christian confession. The other day I drove down the street where the evangelistic event took place and pointed out the spot to my wife. And when I got home, I thought, "I wonder what has come of Garrison Johns?" I opened the telephone book and, sure enough, his name is listed with an address that locates him about ten miles from my present home. Should I call him up? Would he remember? Is he still a bully? Did the ill-gotten Christian confession "take?" Would a meeting result in a personal preview of Armageddon in which I would end up on the losing side? I haven't called him yet. I am putting off the judgment.

Meanwhile, I continue to reflect on what it means to be plunged into history. God made everything good; it also means being discovered by Garrison Johns and finding that not everyone thinks my life is so wonderful. We are plunged into pain and disappointment and suffering. Sometimes it recedes for a while; other times it threatens to overwhelm us.

The final verdict on all of this is death. We die. Strangely, virtually every death, even of the very old, feels like an intrusion and more or less surprises us. Tears and lament give witness to our basic sense that this is *wrong* and that we don't like it one bit. Death provides the fundamental datum that something isn't working the way it was intended and that we have every right to expect something other and better.

The Kerygma of History: The Death of Jesus

The birth of Jesus provides our entrance into the reality and meaning of creation: this is the world of the Father revealed by Jesus. Jesus shows us that the creation is something to be lived, not looked at, and the way he did it becomes the way we do it.

In the same way, the death of Jesus provides our entrance into the mess of history—this round of newspaper headlines, failed plans, disappointed relations, political despair, accident and sickness and neighborhood bullies. Jesus shows us that history, this mess om which we find ourselves, is something to be embraced, not impersonally studied/analyzed, and the way he did it becomes the way we do it.

The death of Jesus is the centerpiece for encountering this fundamental violation of life, this sacrilege visited on creation. We begin to deal with the "what's wrong" with the world at the place where the Gospel deals with it: Jesus dead and buried.

The death of Jesus confirms and validates our experience that there is, in fact, something terribly wrong and that this wrong is not simply a logical working out cause-effect of the way things are. Jesus, born of a virgin, dies on a cross—there is no logic, physical or spiritual, between those two clauses.

Jesus' suffering, recorded in his laments and tears and death, therefore becomes the gospel text for finding our place in history—this history that seems to be so much at variance with what is given and promised in the creation itself, in the life abundant all around us.

Jesus suffered and died. That is the plot which provides the structure of the gospel story. Our four gospel writers, each in his own way, write the story of Jesus' passion—his suffering and death—and then provide it with an extended introduction. The passion story takes place in one week but it is given space far out of proportion to its chronology. Matthew gives a quarter of his pages to the passion; Mark a third; Luke a fifth; and John almost one half. It was for the purpose of telling this story, Jesus' suffering and death, that each evangelist wrote his gospel. Each gospel writer does the extended introduction in his own way, but when it comes to this core material, they all write it pretty much the same way: this is important, repeated four times—we need to know that this happened and how and why it happened. Far more extensively than in any other part of the story of Jesus, we are supplied with details. We are intended to get in on this; we need to know exactly what it is we are getting in on.

The pivotal text in St. John's Gospel is at the near center. Jesus has just ignored the request of some visiting Greek tourists for an interview and announced his death: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (12:24). He then says, and this is the pivotal sentence, "Now my soul is troubled. And what shall I say?—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name!" (12:27–28). Jesus stands at the brink of death; there is still time and opportunity to pull back, avoid the abyss, sidestep the suffering. He considers it. Will he pray for a divine last minute reprieve from death? He decides No; he prays instead, "Father, glorify your name."

The word "glorify" catches our attention. It seemed to fit the account of his birth wonderfully when John wrote, ". . . we have seen his glory . . ." (John 1:14). But this is going to involve a terrible death—glory? We are alerted to look for the God in an unexpected way, the goodness and salvation of God spilling out

of an unlikely container. And that is what happens: This death becomes the center of our understanding and experience of salvation, the help we need to get through what has gone wrong in and around us.

Our scriptures are full of this death language: the passion stories spill over into the epistles and the apocalypse. We are somehow or other going to *die*. There is no avoiding this: *this* is fundamental. Paul distills the entire scheme of God's working in our lives to this and only this: "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2).

Dishonoring the Son: Moralism

But however much we admire Jesus, and however many hymns we write and sing about the death of Jesus, however many years we repeat the cycle of Lent and Holy Week in our churches, this death talk doesn't go down well with us. We can't avoid it in our preaching and hymnody and calendars, but we do manage to find ways to dodge it in the way we live.

The most common way we in the Christian community have of avoiding or marginalizing Jesus' death is by constructing a way of life that is safe and secure. We have a lot of information on how to live rightly before God. The Ten Commandments provide the classic structure for living the way we are supposed to live. And we have considerable stores of wisdom accumulated through the Christian centuries on how to conduct our lives decently and pray effectively. We take on heavy commitments to teaching our children and others, "line upon line, precept upon precept," what God requires of us.

When things go wrong, whether at home or in society, in church or in government, it is often easy to find a moral reason. Disobedience or ignorance of the biblical commandments are obviously at the root of a lot of what is wrong with the world. If we can only educate our people in right thinking and right behavior, things would improve dramatically.

All this is true enough. But the moment this becomes our basic orientation to dealing with what is wrong with the world, we have turned our backs on the cross of Christ, on Jesus as our Savior. The moment this becomes our way of life we dishonor the Son.

I am going to use the term *moralism* to designate this dishonoring. But note the word carefully. The root of it is *moral*, a glorious and necessary word. Morality is built into reality as deeply and inescapably as atoms and protons and neutrons. We are moral beings to the core—the very universe is moral. Right and wrong are embedded in the creation. It matters what is done, said, believed, even thought. Morality is fundamental and non-negotiable.

But moral*ism* is something quite different. Moralism means constructing a way of life in which I have no need of a saving God. Moralism works from a base of human ability and arranges life in such a way that my good behavior will guarantee protection from punishment or disaster. Moralism works from strength, not weakness. Moralism uses God (or the revelation of God) in order not to need God any longer. Moral codes are used as stepping stones to independence from God.

Moralism works from the outside: it imposes right behavior on oneself or others. There is no freedom in it, and no joy. Moralism is a moral grid that is set on life—I know exactly where I fit or don't fit, what actions are right and which are wrong. And once I know that, what else is there? I either do it or don't. Simple.

Do you remember that wonderful Greek story of Procrustes? He had a house alongside a well-traveled road in Greece, a strategically placed bed-and-breakfast. When travelers would come by he offered them hospitality. He had two beds in his house, one for short people, the other for tall. Short people would be put on one bed and then stretched on the rack until they filled the bed; tall people would be put on the other bed and

whatever hung over of arms and legs would be cut off to fit the bed. Everyone was forced to fit the dimensions of the bed, either by stretching or by amputation. Procrustes and his bed are the stuff of moralism: people contemptuous of our individualities force us to fit a preconceived pattern.

And of course, once we go out and buy Procrustean beds and install them in our churches there is no longer any need for Jesus and his cross except in a symbolic way. If what's wrong with the world is simply getting everyone forced into good behavior, we don't need salvation anymore; we need education and training, political reforms and a cultural renaissance, more information and more power.

The word sacrifice is used over and over in our scriptures and theology to define what took place on the cross of Jesus. The word gets its content from centuries of Hebrew practice. Sacrifice begins with material: we bring something to the altar representative of our lives; and we bring our best—flour, grain, lambs, goats, bulls, incense, etc. Once placed on the altar it is no longer ours; we release ownership. We bring our best to God, but we bring it because our best hasn't been good enough; we are sinners and need help. We give ourselves (represented in our offerings) to God to see what God will do with us. This is the best we could do; we are ready now for what God will do. A priest, acting on behalf of God, then burns the offering and it is transformed before our eyes into fragrance and smoke, visibly ascending to God. Death, giving up control and ownership, becomes the stuff of transformation. The priest declares an acceptable offering—our lives accepted, forgiven and pleasing to God. God uses the stuff of our sins to save us from our sins. And "Jesus became sin for us."

We considered earlier how easy and common it is to dishonor the Father. God reveals himself in the birth of Jesus to affirm life and all that is involved in life and then to involve us in it. But there are people who only want to pick out the convenient parts

and discard the rest. Gnostic is our shorthand term for them.

It is also common and easy to dishonor the Son. God reveals himself in the death of Jesus as embracing all that has gone wrong in life and, by means of that sacrificial death, save the world. Along the way God gets us involved in the salvation. But there are people who want to stand aloof from the mess and clean it up at arms length by hiring some teachers and posting some regulations. Moralist is our shorthand term for them. They want to substitute a Procrustean Bed for a Christian Altar.

Cultivating the Honor of God the Son

The Christian community will give up teaching moral behavior, giving instruction in the commandments of Moses, the imperatives of Jesus and the exhortations of Paul. But however important they are, they cannot serve as the center. We cultivate the honor of God the Son by following Jesus to the cross. The one word that expresses this most succinctly is sacrifice. When we are faced with the enormous wrong in the world around and within us we respond by cultivating a life of sacrifice.

For a people like us, trained in a culture of getting things done (pragmatism) and taking care of ourselves (individualism), this doesn't seem at all obvious; neither does it seem attractive. There is nothing about a life of sacrifice that appeals to our well-intentioned desire to make a difference in the wrongdoing in the world and make things better for neighbors and ourselves.

When we realize how bad things are in this God-blessed world, we quite naturally want to pitch in and help clean up the mess. We look around for something to do. We look for some tools or strategies or programs to reform and renovate and renew. In the process of looking around we happen to look at Jesus. He is the one who was sent to save the world from destruction and doom. The Christian church is agreed that history pivots on him. In Jesus and only in Jesus is the salvation of the world.

We watch him with heightened interest: what exactly did he do? Well, he sacrificed his life on the cross of Calvary. Our gospel witnesses make it clear that his death was no accidental miscarriage of Roman justice, no cruel Greek tragic fate that inexorably overtook him. Jesus *embraced* it as his vocation, telling his disciples well beforehand: ". . . the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). He prepared them and us meticulously as he approached the high moment of sacrifice, three times telling them that he was going to suffer and be rejected and be killed (Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:34). He also said he would rise again, but that would come later.

Three times Jesus plainly told them what he was doing. At the last minute he also prayed three times to the Father to provide another way of salvation for the world. But there was no other way. "*This* is the way; walk ye in it!" And when through that night of Gethsemane prayer it became as clear to him as he had already made it to his disciples that there were no alternatives, he agreed to give himself as the sacrifice for "us and for our salvation." He gave himself as the sacrifice that would set the world's wrongs right.

St. Paul, the definitive preacher and interpreter of Jesus, knew no other way. He took the cross of Christ as the text for his life and ministry. "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). As he looked over his life retrospectively while writing to the Philippians, he was content to stay in the same track, ". . . sharing in his [Christ's] suffering by becoming like him in his death" (Philippians 3:10). It was precisely *this* vocation that he invited his disciples to take up: ". . . if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34).

I don't know of any part of the Christian gospel that is more difficult to move from the pages of sacred scripture and our

honored volumes of theology into the assumptions and practices of our everyday Christian lives. Very few among us would dissent from what Jesus said, what Paul wrote, what Calvin preached, and yet—and yet when it comes down to actual assent, we more often than not find another way. We begin our morning prayers with Jesus, "Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet . . ." (Mark 14:36). And our "yet . . ." trails off and instead of completing Jesus' prayer (". . . not what I want but what you want") we begin entertaining other possibilities. If all things are possible for the Father, perhaps there is another way to do something about what is wrong with the world, a way by which I can help out and make things better other than a sacrificial life. In the jargon of the day we pray, "sacrifice is not one of my gifts—I want to serve God with my strength, with my giftedness." It's a strange thing, but sacrifice never seems to show up on anyone's Myers-Briggs profile.

The self-promotion and self-help ways of salvation, so popular among us, do nothing but spiral us further into the abyss. There is no other way but sacrifice. Annie Dillard, one of our unconventional but most passionate theologians, is blunt in her verdict: ". . . a life without sacrifice is abomination."[1]

I am not calling into question anyone's sincerity in this business. But I am reminding you that we have two thousand years of history documenting the failure of good intentions in the work of salvation. There is only one gospel way to do this: to live a sacrificial life in Jesus' name.

However, the trouble with a word like sacrifice is that it sounds grandiose and so easily blurs into generalities. It is a grand word and is quickly smothered in a welter of telephone calls, committee meetings, job assignments, and political urgencies. But there is a way to keep it in focus without being grandiose, a humble and ordinary way—the way of hospitality.

Hospitality is the gospel way to keep sacrifice local and immediate: a meal prepared and served to family and guests is

a giving up of ourselves for another. We all have daily opportunities to be on both the giving and receiving ends of a sacrificial life, to see how it works, to observe the emotions and effects. Isn't it terribly significant that much of Jesus' ministry is revealed to us in the context of a meal? Preparing and cooking, serving and eating meals are activities that underlay participation in the work of salvation.

The form the church uses to cultivate this life of sacrifice among us is Holy Communion: a meal (hospitality!) which draws us into the sacrifice of Christ and nurtures a sacrificial life among us. At the Lord's Table we are at the place of sacrifice, Jesus' sacrifice. We deliberately set ourselves obediently and expectantly in God's presence in order that our lives become formed sacrificial. The intent is that everything in our lives that takes place as we leave the Lord's Table will be informed and shaped by what takes place at the Table. There is a saying among cooks and gourmets, "What you eat is what you are." That is never more true than when we receive the life of Jesus in the bread and wine of the Holy Supper and then continue to share it in breakfasts of cornflakes and toast, lunches of baloney sandwiches, and suppers of tuna casserole. Every meal—breakfast, lunch, and supper—whatever the menu, wherever and with whomever we eat it, puts us in the company of Jesus who ate his meals with sinners, and gave himself for us.

Notes

1. Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 15.

4
CHRIST PLAYS IN COMMUNITY

Introduction

Perichoresis is a word of which I have become very fond. It's a Greek word, used by our Christian ancestors to talk about the Trinity. I like the sound of the word, *perichoresis*; the syllables skip and dance so precisely. Even more I like the folk dance sort of image. Picture a folk dance with units made up of three partners. The music starts and the movement begins, the three partners holding hands and dancing in a circle; then, on signal, they break away, change partners, reverse directions, rearrange their positions, whirl this partner, then the next, break apart, come together. The tempo picks up, the momentum increases, skipping, turning, reversing, changing partners, splitting apart, coming together—all the time in rhythm with the music and in coordinated relationship with each other. The movements are swift; it is hard to distinguish one person from another. They blur into one another, yet they are always separate, touching lightly. No person does his or her own thing; each in his or her separate movements is part of the same dance.

Perichoresis. Trinity. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God in three persons, but the persons are only present to us in relationship and the relationship is dynamic and alive, like the dance. The persons of the Godhead can never be known in isolation from one another: the godhead is not divided up functionally, each part assigned to one aspect of divinity, the Father going off in one direction to do God' work, the Son in another direction to do his, and the Holy Spirit in yet another, with the three coming back together in the evening, comparing notes on what has been accomplished, then preparing an organizational

chart for the next day's work and deciding who will do what.

If that is the way we imagine God we will never get it right: God cannot be understood functionally. God is a being-in-personal-relationship and can only be understood relationally, or as our ancestors were fond of saying, *perichoretically*. God cannot be pinned down for analysis: examining the Father for attributes and function; the Son likewise; and then the Spirit. Whenever the Father is at work, the Son and Spirit are present also; whenever the Son is at work, the Father and Spirit are present also; whenever the Spirit is at work, the Father and the Son are present also. And they change positions so swiftly you are never be sure who is where and doing what with which partner. "Swing your partner, *dos y dos* . . . !"

Which means of course that we cannot specialize in one or another aspect of the Trinity. Dealing with one person involves the other persons whether you are aware of it or not and whether you like it or not. God cannot be divided against himself. And it also means that what we are doing here together, spending a lecture on the Father, a lecture on the Son, and a lecture on the Spirit, has to be constantly re-imaged in Trinitarian terms through the lens of the Christ who plays in ten thousand places.

We honor the Father by taking life seriously: we are set down in this place that is burgeoning with life—this glorious creation. What does it mean to live on this local soil, look into these hometown faces? Beginning with the birth of Jesus we cultivate an attentive, adoring life in honor of the Father.

We honor the Son by taking suffering and death seriously: we are set down in this place that is plagued with suffering and death—this mess of history. Death all around us and we ourselves doomed to die. What does it mean to be enmeshed in North American history? Beginning with the kerygmatic death of Jesus we cultivate a sacrificial life in honor of the Son.

We honor the Spirit by taking ourselves-in-community

seriously: we realize that there is more to us than biology and history, our genetic code and family tree. We have both the desire and capacity to get in on what God is doing: we find ourselves believing and praying. What does it mean to find ourselves believing and praying in a world in which God lives and dies in Jesus? Beginning with the kerygmatic resurrection of Jesus we cultivate a life of obedient love in honor of the Spirit.

Honoring the Spirit
Exploring the Neighborhood of the Soul-in-Community

One of the irrepressible features of this life of ours is that we want to be in on whatever is going on. We are not content to be spectators; we want to help, participate in the creation, in this history. In some way or other I am part of all of this, and I want to get in on it.

As an adolescent, one of the visions that filled my head with flash and color and glory was the French Revolution. I actually knew very little about it. Some vague impressions, incidents and names, were mixed haphazardly in my mind to produce a drama of pure romance, excitement, and the triumph of righteousness. If I had had access then to my present vocabulary I probably would have used the word Holy to sum it up: something spiritually blazing and extravagant and glorious.

I had this picture of idealistic, devoted men and women with the ringing affirmations of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity on their lips, marching through a corrupt, sinful world and purging it with their righteous ideas and action. Names like Marat, Robespierre, and Danton had a ringing and righteous sound in my ears. Evil dungeons in the Bastille were deep shadows against which the fires of liberation burned purely. Heroism and villainy were in apocalyptic conflict. The guillotine was an instrument of the Last Judgment separating the sheep from the

goats. Thus my imagination, untroubled by facts, spun a wonderful fantasy of the glorious French Revolution.

When I arrived at college and looked through a catalogue of courses, I was delighted to find listed one on the French Revolution. I had to wait a year to take it since first-year students were not admitted, but that only served to whet my appetite. Returning for my second year, my first move was to enroll in the course.

The class was one of the significant disappointments of my college years. I brought the kind of great expectations to it that adolescents often do to adult enterprises, but nothing of what I expected took place. The professor was a slight, elderly woman with thin, wispy gray hair. She dressed in dark, shapeless silks, and spoke in a soft, timorous monotone. She was a wonderfully nice person and was academically well qualified in her field of European history. But as a teacher of the French Revolution she was a disaster. She knew everything about the French but nothing about revolution.

I, meanwhile, knew practically nothing about the subject and the few facts I had in my possession were nearly all of them wrong. What I possessed, in fact, was a vast ignorance about the whole business. But I was right about one thing: it was a revolution. Revolutions turn things inside out and upside down. Revolutions are titanic struggles between antagonistic wills. Revolutions excite the desire for a better life of freedom, *promise* a better life of freedom. Sometimes they make good on their promises and set people free. More often they don't. But after a revolution nothing is quite the same again.

Sitting in her classroom, though, day after day no one would ever know that. Ill-fated Marat, murderous Charlotte Corday, the black Bastille, the bloody guillotine, venal and opportunistic Danton, giddy Marie-Antoinette, ox-like Louis XVI—all the players and props in that colorful and violent age were pre-

sented in the same platitudinous, tired, and pious voice. Everybody sounded the same in her lectures. They were all presented as neatly labeled specimens, butterflies on a mounting board on which a decade or so of dust had settled. For a long time after that, the French Revolution seemed to me a very great bore. Say the words "French Revolution" and I yawned.

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A few years later I had become a pastor and was astonished to find men and women in my congregation yawning. Matt Ericson went to sleep every Sunday; he always made it through the first hymn but ten minutes later was sound asleep. Red Belton, an angry teenager, sat on the back pew out of sight of his parents and read comic books. Karl Strothheim, a bass in the choir, passed notes supplemented by whispers to Luther Olsen on stock market tips. One woman gave me hope: every Sunday she brought a stenographic notebook and wrote down everything I said in shorthand. At least one person was paying attention. Then I learned that she was getting ready to leave her husband and was using the hour of worship to practice her shorthand so she could get a self-supporting job.

These were, most of them, good people, nice people. They were familiar with the Christian faith, knew the Christian stories, showed up on time for worship each Sunday. But they yawned. How could they do that? How could anyone go to sleep ten minutes after singing "Blessing and Honor and Glory and Power . . . ?" How could anyone sustain interest in Batman when St. Paul's *Romans* was being read? How could anyone be content to practice shorthand when the resurrected Christ was present in Word and Sacrament? I had, it seemed, a whole congregation of saints and sinners who knew everything about the Christian life except that it was *holy*, a holy resurrection

life. They knew the word "Christian" pretty well, and identified themselves as Christians. But *holy*?

I knew I had my work cut out for me. When I was ordained and called to be their pastor, I had supposed that my task was to teach and preach the truth of the scriptures so that they would know God and how God works their salvation; I had supposed that my task was to help them make moral decisions so that they could live happily ever after with a clear conscience. I had supposed that my task was to pray with and for them, gathering them in the presence of a holy God who made heaven and earth and sent Jesus to die for their sins. Now I realized that more than accurate learning was at stake, more than moral behavior was at stake, more than getting them on their knees on a Sunday morning was at stake. *Life* was at stake—*their* lives, their *souls*. People can think correctly and behave rightly and worship politely and still live badly—live anemically; live bored and insipid and trivial lives.

And that's when I got seriously interested in the word "holy," what Gerard Manley Hopkins described as "the dearest freshness deep down things."[1] I started looking for signs of the holy, evidence of the holy—holy lives, holy places, Holy Spirit. After a good bit of casting around, I found the place to begin was with the resurrection of Jesus.

The Kerygma of the Soul: The Resurrection of Jesus

The Gospel, while honoring our experience, doesn't begin with our experience. We don't begin a holy life by wanting a holy life, desiring to be good, fulfilled, complete; wanting to be included in the grand scheme of things. We have been anticipated, and the way we have been anticipated is by resurrection, Jesus' resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus establishes the entire Christian life in the action of God by the Holy Spirit. The Christian life

begins in the place of impossibility, the tomb. Just as Jesus' birth launches us into the Creation and Jesus' death launches us into History, Jesus' resurrection launches us into living in Community, the holy community. Jesus resurrection is the kerygmatic pivot for living in community of the Holy Spirit.

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Continuing to use St. John's Gospel as our working context, the text that holds this in focus is: ". . . [Jesus] breathed on them [his assembled disciples] and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" You will remember that a few days before, on the evening before his crucifixion, Jesus had an extended conversation with his disciples that prepared them for his death and resurrection. Throughout that conversation he promised them over and over again, with variations, that when he was gone physically he would be present in the Spirit (John 14:15–17, 25–26; 15:26; 16:7–11, 13–14). Now he is making good on that promise: "Receive the Holy Spirit." He is replacing himself with himself. Resurrection is the work of the Holy Spirit in Jesus, raising him from the dead and presenting him before the disciples; resurrection is also the work of the Holy Spirit in those of us who believe in and follow Jesus.

I have used the word kerygmatic to identify those pivotal moments in the life of Jesus that so clearly reveal God to us and for us: birth, death, and resurrection. Kerygmatic, because it is an announcement, a proclamation of something that has happened quite apart from us but that defines the reality in which we live. And defines it in such a way that we realize that it is wonderfully good—actually, a redefinition of life so that we no longer see ourselves as reduced to ourselves, having to take charge of ourselves and everyone around us, "to make something of ourselves" as we are so often told; nor do we any

longer understand ourselves as having to put up with everything that comes to us and make the best of it.

No, each of these moments is a proclamation: *this*—this birth of Jesus, this death of Jesus, this resurrection of Jesus—is something we cannot do for ourselves, cannot take credit for, cannot take over and run, cannot reproduce in any way. It is done for us. We can only hear and believe and enter this God-for-us reality that is so generously given as both the context and the content of our lives.

Right now I want to anchor our lives—the way we live our lives, the impulses and desires we have to get in on what God is doing in the wonders of creation and the mess of history—in resurrection. There is no living worth its salt that is not the consequence of the action of God in Jesus through the Holy Spirit: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through the Spirit which dwells in you" (Romans 8:11). Paul is tireless in the variations he plays on this theme. This is the kind of living that we designate holy living. A resurrection life.

There are symmetries in the birth-death-resurrection stories but there is also this difference: we experience birth and death, at least biologically, in what appear to us as natural conditions; but the resurrection is supernatural. Jesus did not raise himself; he was raised.

It is critical that we get inside this and make it our own, that we realize not just that the resurrection happened but that it happens. Too often we make the resurrection a matter of apologetics and melt the resurrection accounts down into an ingot of doctrine; for Jesus (and Paul interpreting Jesus) it is primarily a matter for holy living: receive the Holy Spirit, this Holy Spirit by whom Jesus has just been raised from the dead, so you can continue this resurrection life in your prayers and obedience.

It happens; we do not make it happen. The more we get involved in what God is doing, the less we do; the more we participate in God's work as revealed in Jesus, the more is done to us and the more is done through us. The more we practice resurrection, the less we are on our own or by ourselves—for we find that this resurrection that is so intensely and relationally personal in Father, Son, and Spirit, at the same time plunges us into relationships with brothers and sisters we never knew we had; we are in community.

Dishonoring the Spirit: Sectarianism

Community. We are not ourselves by ourselves. We are born into communities; we live in communities; we die in communities. Human beings are not solitary, self-sufficient creatures. When Jesus said,"Receive the Holy Spirit," he said it to the assembled community. When St. Luke described the descent of the Holy Spirit it was upon the 120 praying and waiting followers of Jesus "together in one place."

And yet, something odd keeps intruding into these communities. It is so glaringly out of place in the context of the biblical revelation that one would think it would be noticed immediately and banned absolutely. More frequently it is welcomed and embellished. I am talking about individualism. Men and women who have just been de-centered and defunctionalized suddenly become obsessed with these wonderfully saved souls that they know themselves to be and begin cultivating their own spiritualities. Self-spirituality has become the hallmark of our age. The spirituality of Me—a spirituality of self-centering, self-sufficiency, self-development. At the present all over the world are people who have found themselves redefined by the revelation of God in Jesus' birth, death and resurrection, going off and cultivating the Divine Within and abandoning spouses, children, friends and congregations.

This is not only odd; it is outrageous. For one thing, it makes hash of our inclusion in Jesus' prayer for his about-to-be-scattered friends that "they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us . . . that they may become completely one . . ." (John 17:21, 23). For another, it removes Jesus' primary and insistently repeated love command from its controlling and dominating place in our lives. None of us, of course, would think of eliminating the love command, but we routinely place it on the margins and so relativize it—we pick the people and places and occasions in which we will practice it.

But holy living, resurrection living, is not a self-project. We are a *people* of God and cannot live holy lives, resurrection lives, as individuals. The love that God pours out for and in us creates a community in which that love is reproduced in our love for one another. We are a community, a people of God.

One of the common ways in which we avoid the appearance of crass individualism is through sectarianism: we gather with other people in the name of Jesus, but we pre-define them according to our own tastes and predispositions. But this is just a cover for our individualism: we reduce the community to conditions congenial to the imperial self. The sectarian impulse is strong in all branches of the church because it provides such a convenient appearance of community without the difficulties of loving people we don't approve of, and letting Jesus pray us into relationship with the very men and women we've invested a good bit of time avoiding. We construct religious clubs instead of entering resurrection communities. Sects are termites in the Father's House.

Cultivating the Honor of God the Spirit

This is a most attractive life, this resurrection life. The birth and death of Jesus come together in an amazing and personal

way in Jesus' resurrection. And now we find that our lives, our birth and death, come together in resurrection: Jesus' resurrection becomes our resurrection. We read Paul's words, "If you have been raised with Christ . . ." (Colossians 3:1), and say, "If? no, Since . . ." he made us "alive together with Christ" (Ephesians 2:5), ". . . it is Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). The resurrection stories of our four evangelists are now fused by Paul into the language of personal participation. The Christian life is a Jesus-resurrection life, a life that is accomplished by the Spirit.

The major and persistent difficulty in cultivating a life that honors the Spirit, this Spirit who raises us up with Jesus, is that we want to take over. We have this wonderful gift of new life, and now we move in and start giving orders to the Spirit on how we think it should be conducted. How do we stay involved without getting in the way?

Two imperatives chart the way. Neither is difficult to understand, but it takes a lifetime of attention and discipline to be shaped by them. The words are Repent and Follow. Repent is the *No* and Follow the *Yes* of the Christian life. The two words have to be worked out in changing conditions and various conditions through the life of the church and in each of our lives. We never master either command to the extent that we graduate and go to higher things. These are basic and remain basic.

Repent. Repent is an action word: change direction. You are going the wrong way, thinking the wrong thoughts, imagining everything backwards. The first thing we do to honor the Spirit is to quit whatever we are doing. Regardless of what it is, it is almost sure to be wrong, no matter how hard we are trying, no matter how well intentioned we are. We think we are in charge, that we are the measure of all things, that everything depends on us. We are traveling a broad road paved with good inten-

tions, expertly engineered with the latest technologies to get us to where we want to go with the least inconvenience, efficiently and quickly. It is a heavily trafficked road, noisy and polluted, with many accidents and fatalities. But it gets us where we want to go so we put up with almost anything to get there.

And then the gospel word comes: repent. Turn around. Change your way of thinking, your way of imagining. Leave the noise, the pollution, the clutter, the depersonalizing efficiency, the technology-enabled hurry. Just say a loud, authoritative, non-negotiable "No." We are on holy ground and we need to protect it from profane stomping and trampling.

We cultivate the resurrection life not by adding something to our lives but by renouncing the frenetic ego life, clearing out the cultural and religious clutter, turning our backs on what we commonly summarize as "the world, the flesh, and the devil." Our churches are too busy and our schedules are too full.

And then *Follow.* Follow Jesus. Following Jesus is the "Yes" that follows the "No." We have renounced initiative for obedience. We have renounced clamoring assertions for quiet listening. We watch Jesus work; we listen to Jesus speak; we accompany Jesus into new relationships, odd places and odd people. Keeping company with Jesus, observing what he does and listening to what he says, develops into a life of answering God, a life of responding to God, which is to say, a life of prayer. For following Jesus is not a robotic, lock-step marching in a straight line after Jesus. The following gets inside us, becomes internalized, gets into our muscles and nerves; it becomes prayer. Prayer is what develops in us after we step out of the center and begin responding to the center, to Jesus. And that response is always physical—a following, for Jesus is going someplace: he is going to Jerusalem, and he is going to the Father. We follow Jesus, joining the company of his followers, cultivating a life of prayer in Jesus' name, finding

that the Spirit is praying in us and through us to the Father. We are in the world of the Trinity where all is attention and adoration, sacrifice and hospitality (communion), obedience and love.

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In virtually all of our Christian traditions, Holy Baptism is the defining first word in the resurrection life, setting our unique and personal—Christian!— name in the name of the Trinity. Jesus' baptism at the Jordan was marked by the descent of the Spirit on and into him at which time he began his public ministry of proclaiming the kingdom of God. The baptism of the first community of Christians in Jerusalem was marked by the descent of the Holy Spirit among them at which time they began to speak the language and do the work of God's kingdom in the world. Because we do not baptize ourselves—it is always something done to us by God in the community—the resurrection life is accepted as previous to and outside ourselves, which then enters into and becomes our true selves. And it is always done with the assent, participation, and affirmation of the community of faithful, worshipping Christians. Holy Baptism is at one and the same time naming, repentance, death, resurrection, membership in community, and following Jesus in the name of the Trinity.

Holy Baptism defines the terms in which we cultivate the honor of the Spirit: a turning away from ourselves and a following of Jesus in the name of the Trinity. A renunciation and an embrace, a beginning, which requires re-enactment every day of our lives. For we cannot be trusted to do anything on our own in this business. As Karl Barth insisted so strenuously, we are always "beginners with God."[2]

Notes

1. Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose.* 27.

2. Karl Barth, *The Christian Life,* tr. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 80.